

## **A Byzantine Relic in a Baroque Palace; the Church of Our Saviour in the Bonajuto Palace in Catania**

Denis De Lucca - University of Malta

---

In 1393, King Martin I of Sicily, better known as ‘Martin the Younger’ of Aragon (1390-1409), who had just married Maria of Sicily, foiled an attempt of the powerful Artale Alagona and some other noblemen who included Francesco II, Count of Ventimiglia, Manfredi III Chiamonte, Count of Modica, and Guglielmo Peralta, Count of Caltabellotta, to revolt against his rule.<sup>1</sup> The reaction of the victorious

---

The Author is indebted to Dott.ssa Giusi Ruggeri, curator of the Bonajuto property in via Bonajuto, Catania for her valuable explanations during my visit to the Byzantine Church in December 2016.

- 1 Born in Catania, Queen Maria of Sicily, was the daughter and heir of Frederick the Simple by his first wife Constance of Aragon. As she was very young at the time of her father’s death in 1377, the government of Sicily was taken over by four baronial families who styled themselves “vicars” led by the regent who had been named by Maria’s father, Artale Alagona. In 1379 she was kidnapped by count William Raymond of Montcada, a Sicilian nobleman and member of the Aragonese House of Montcada, to prevent her marriage with Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, and imprisoned for two years in the castle of Licata. Since Montcada’s move had been approved by her grandfather King Peter IV of Aragon, in 1382 Maria was rescued by an Aragonese fleet and taken to Aragon, where she married in February, 1392, Martin the Younger, the son of King Martin I of Aragon, known in history as ‘the Elder’ or ‘the Ecclesiastic’. In 1392 Martin and Maria returned to Sicily with a strong military force and defeated the indicated group of opposing barons. Martin ruled Sicily as Martin I of Sicily jointly with his wife Maria, who, however, died in Lentini on 25 May 1401. He himself died of malaria on 25 July 1409 without a male heir and was therefore automatically succeeded by his father who now ruled both

king was to reward the Bonajuto and other Sicilian families who had remained loyal to him, with plots of land in the area of the *Civita* of Catania. In a gesture of particular gratitude to the Bonajuto family, the king authorised them to build a palatial residence on a vacant plot of land which then incorporated an important Byzantine church dedicated to Our Saviour, standing in majestic isolation not far away from the Norman Cathedral of Catania.<sup>2</sup> When built shortly afterwards in a quarter of Medieval Catania which was then characterised by a maze of tortuous narrow streets and alleys, the first Aragonese Bonajuto palace was therefore enriched with a unique and prestigious relic of Sicily's Byzantine past, this so much increasing the prestige of its owners, that they managed to acquire feudatory nobility in 1428 and great social and political importance in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Catania, by marrying into the most aristocratic families of the city and repeatedly holding the prestigious posts of *capitano* and *giurato*.

The first Bonajuto palace incorporating the Byzantine church and some subsequent alterations that were carried out in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, seems to have survived the powerful earthquake of 1669 but not that of 1693 which completely destroyed Catania and many other towns in South-East Sicily. This tragic event is succinctly described in a unique document kept in the Casanatense library in Rome. [Fig. 1] as follows:

*“Il più orrendo spettacolo è stato in Cattania, e nelli 18 Casali e case della Campagna, tutte rovinate da fondamenti, a tal Segno, che questi luoghi paiono un mucchio di pietre, e polvere. Nella Città suddetta perderono 17 in 18 mila persone, e nelli Casali da 12 mila Anime, havendosi salvati solo da tutti detti*

---

Aragon as Martin I of Aragon and Sicily as Martin II of Sicily. Catania must have been well known to him since, during the reign of his son, it had served him well as a convenient forward base to satisfy his well-known religious zeal and launch two ferocious crusades against the Moors in North Africa in 1398 and 1399. See also Aprile, F., *Della cronologia universale della Sicilia* (Palermo, 1725), 207; Lo Forte Scirpo, M.R., *C'era una volta una regina: due donne per un regno: Maria d'Aragona e Bianca di Navarra* (Naples: Liguori, 2003).

2 Flaccavento, G. and Scifo, A., *Cappella Bonajuto: Preziosa architettura bizantina a Catania*. (Catania:Alma Editore, 2005), 6.

*luoghi da Quattro mila persone, alcuni di queste sono rimaste ferrite, e stordite, e molti si sono fuggiti in Calabria. Nella Chiesa Cattedrale di questa Città vi erano da 10 mila persone che stavano alla benedictione del Santissimo Corpo di Christo, solo 600 di queste sono salvate, che restarono nella Cappella della gloriosa Sant' Agata, ed il Sacerdote che stava in atto per dare la benedizione al popolo restando col Santissimo nelle mani”<sup>3</sup>*

It is significant that in this report entitled *Relazione de’ danni cagionati da terremoti sentiti nel regno di Sicilia cavata dall’ultime lettere di Messina sotto il 28 Gennaro 1693* – eventually published in the printing press of Domenico Antonio Ercole in Rome - the Byzantine church of Our Saviour, well entrenched some two metres below the present city level, is not mentioned among the casualties of the earthquake. Gaetano Randazzo in a scholarly 2004 contribution entitled *Il complesso monumentale inglobato nel Palazzo Bonajuto in Catania* published in the *Atti del VI Congresso Nazionale dell’Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini*,<sup>4</sup> - supported by at least two other earlier sources F. Privitera (2001)<sup>5</sup> and G. Agnello (1947),<sup>6</sup> - mentions the fact that the old church and parts of the palace remained relatively untouched. The evidence of these scholars of Sicilian history seems to have been hinged on a revealing watercolour painting made by the French traveller Jean-Pierre-Louis-Laurent Houël (1735 –1813) [Fig.3] on the occasion of his second voyage to Sicily and Malta. In the third volume of his *Voyage Pittoresque des isles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari* published in Paris 1782,<sup>7</sup> Houël mentions the “*Petite église de*

3 Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome: Shelfmark: vol.Misc 2357.23

4 Randazzo, G., *Il complesso monumentale inglobato nel Palazzo Bonajuto in Catania*, published in ‘Atti del VI Congresso Nazionale dell’Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini.’ University of Catania: Facoltà di lettere e filosofia, 2004.

5 Privitera, F., *Annuario Catanese*. (Catania, 1690), 224

6 Agnello, G., *La basilichetta trichora del Salvatore a Catania*. RAC 23 (1947), 147-168.

7 Houël, J.P., *Voyage Pittoresque des isles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari*. (Paris 1782). The tombs mentioned and illustrated by Houël in his watercolour painting and the interventions that were carried out by the Bonajuto family to re-use the old Byzantine cemetery as a Bonajuto burial place are discussed by F. Ferrara, *Guida dei viaggiatori agli oggetti piu interessanti a vedere in Sicilia* (Palermo, 182), 98.

*Salvator de Catane bâtee sur un tombeau antique*” illustrated in this painting, which is now kept in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. And in 1778, the Prince of Biscari, in his *Plano delle Antichità Siciliane* also referred to the “*Chiesa in casa di Bonajuto*” as forming part of an ancient cemetery, adding that this Byzantine church was by this time well integrated in the building of the new Baroque Bonajuto palace:

“*Si vedeva non sono molti anni porzione dello esterno di questo edificio, che mi ricordo di essere stato tutto coperto di riquadrate pietre di lava, ma oggi resta intieramente occultato dalla novella fabbrica*”.<sup>8</sup>

But how did this unusual Baroque ‘conservation’ exercise come about? In 1694, Giuseppe Lanza, the Duke of Camastra and Prince of Santo Stefano – commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy of Sicily, Don Juan Francisco Pacheco, the Duke of Uzeda, and helped by Don Giuseppe Azmundo, a powerful nobleman from Catania, and by the Flemish military engineer in charge of Sicily, Colonel Don Carlos de Grunenberg - drew up a masterplan for the rebuilding of Catania. Based on eighteenth-century urban criteria of planning and aesthetics, this masterplan saw the application of an orthogonal system of street planning and the rebuilding of several palaces along the present via Vittorio Emanuele. These included the Palazzo Biscari, the Palazzo Mazza, the Palazzo Polino-S.Alfano, the Palazzo Valle, the Palazzo Pedagoggi and the Palazzo Bonajuto.<sup>9</sup> In the rebuilding of the last palace, it is interesting to see that in contradiction to the usual attitude of the Baroque mind to clear the site of older buildings - in this case, the Byzantine church and the remains of the first palace - and start re-building

---

8 Gaetano Randazzo in footnote 5 on page 737 of his work states that the *Plano delle Antichità Siciliane* together with another one entitled *Relazione di un viaggio per tutte le antichità della Sicilia* which was in 1781 published in Naples in book form by I. Paterno Castello, is kept in the Roberto Paternò Castello di Biscari archives.

9 Flaccavento, and Scifo, *Cappella Bonajuto*, 10-11. See also Boscarino, S., *Sicilia barocca: Architettura e città 1610-1760*. (Rome, 1986).

operations on new inflexible lines, the inverse actually happened. Was it, perhaps, Francesco Bonajuto, a *cavaliere* of the realm, who would have insisted that the Byzantine church - about which more below - and the parts of his old palace that had survived the earthquake shock, would have to be incorporated in the rebuilding operations? Would the well-known deep religious convictions of the baron and the respect that he would have had for the intact tombs of his ancestors have driven him to insist that a church that had miraculously survived the earthquake, now had to be somehow married with the new eighteenth-century Baroque concepts of palace design in Catania being promoted by the star Baroque architect Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (1702-1768)?<sup>10</sup> And would this explain why, irrespective of the dominating presence of the Byzantine church, the new palace of the baron would have nonetheless demonstrated a typically Baroque block-building typology? A typology [Fig.4] which was based on a spacious inner courtyard where every effort seems to have been made to respect the Baroque age criteria of “*comfort and convenience*” so that the ornate Baroque carriages of his guests could enter through the large gate in via S. Gaetano from where they would have entered and stopped in the hallway with its new grand staircase leading to the *piano nobile*, to be then temporarily parked in the courtyard. And also incorporated in the baron’s new palace was an

---

10 Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (3 February 1702 – 11 March 1768) was an Italian architect, notable for his work in the Sicilian Baroque style in his Catania during the period of massive rebuilding following the earthquake of 1693. Born in Palermo, Vaccarini studied architecture in Rome, under the patronage of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni. His studies suggested that he was mostly interested in combining the contrasting approaches of Borromini and Bernini. Having returned to Sicily in 1730 or thereabouts, his work seems then to have been influenced by the Roman architects Alessandro Specchi, Francesco de Sanctis and Filippo Raguzzini, who tended to reject the classicising of buildings advocated by the Accademia di San Luca in favour of a much more flamboyant style. Both Specchi and de Sanctis were closely involved with the design of grand staircases, common to Italian palaces with a *piano nobile*. This grand staircase approach to a building was to be invaluable in Sicily, not only for the practical reasons of entering the *piano nobile*, but also for the creation of a grand approach to churches and cathedrals, when the topography of the site permitted such a feature. In Catania, Vaccarini was responsible for the design of the magnificent Baroque Cathedral.

old spiral staircase [Fig.5] that could have originally formed part of the bell-tower of the Byzantine church or, alternatively, a minaret which would have been added during the hard times of Muslim domination when the church could have been converted into a mosque, as often happened elsewhere. There was then an unexplainable eighteenth-century brutal shape adjustment of one of the apses of the church to accommodate the new rooms that now had to be orthogonally re-aligned with the Via Vittorio Emanuele of the new Catania. Notwithstanding the many signs of the vicissitudes that would have been encountered during the difficult operations of integrating an old building in a new Baroque palace - that had to vie with its neighbours in the same street - there is evidence, however, to suggest that Baron Francesco Bonajuto was well pleased with the end result. Bearing this in mind, one can understand why, on the occasion of its re-opening after restoration on Saturday 3 March 2013, his descendant, the present Baron Salvatore Bonaiuto, proudly said: *“Questo gioiello appartiene alla mia famiglia, ma è patrimonio di tutta la città”*.<sup>11</sup>

But what about this Byzantine Church of the Saviour, ]so well reproduced in Jean Houël’s painting? A leaflet to facilitate a visit to

---

11 Tuesday 13 December 2016 issue of LiveSiciliaCatania journal: Federica Campilongo’s article entitled *Riapre la cappella Bonajuto Cuore medievale della città* : *“CATANIA - Un gioiellino nel cuore della Civita, a 2 metri dal livello della strada, che ha resistito ai terribili terremoti del 1169 e del 1693. Una testimonianza preziosa dell’antica città bizantina, a pochi passi dalla Catania storica conosciuta e visibile, la Cappella Bonajuto tornerà presto a disposizione di tutti. Dei turisti che in passato non hanno potuto visitarla perché chiusa, e dei catanesi, spesso ignari di avere a pochi passi un luogo magico, in cui arte e storia si fondono e si confondono con i sovrastanti palazzi barocchi. ‘Sarà riaperta alla città’. Lo annuncia con soddisfazione il barone Salvatore Bonajuto, la cui famiglia è proprietaria del sito, che da anni si prodiga per fare conoscere la cappella medievale, accompagnando i gruppi di turisti e ospitando manifestazioni, e il cui intento, adesso, è proprio quello di condividere con la popolazione la preziosa eredità, aprendola quotidianamente. ‘Questo gioiello appartiene alla mia famiglia, ma è patrimonio di tutta la città – afferma Bonajuto. ‘Eppure, nonostante sia un importante pezzo di storia e uno dei pochi edifici di epoca bizantina di Catania – aggiunge – è poco conosciuto. Per questo ho deciso di affidare in gestione la caffetteria, affinché questo luogo torni aperto a tutti”*.

the church gives the following information based on the study of the building by the above-mentioned Gaetano Randazzo [Fig. 5];

*“From the via Bonajuto, we have access to this small church through an eighteenth-century door, characterised by an elegant cornice above the architrave, that was realised during the reconstruction of the palace after the earthquake of 1693. At the end of the small entrance room, a two-colour portal from the fifteenth century, composed of basalt and white calcareous stone from Siracusa, marks the entrance to the chapel. This was inserted in the external wall of the first Bonajuto Palace constructed during the Aragonese period around the small church, badly damaged in the 1693 earthquake.... Once we pass the arch, a staircase takes us inside the old Byzantine church. Having reached the original level of the floor, two metres below the present street level, we can observe the trefoil temple, which, respecting the Byzantine architectural tradition, consists of three semi-circular apses, 4.30 metres deep and 3 metres wide, juxtaposed on a central square space measuring 8 metres by 8 metres. During the Byzantine period, the entrance of the church was on the southern side, perhaps introduced by a small portico, while the main apse was on the northern side. On the north-west side there seems to have been a bell tower of which remains a winding staircase visible beyond the door of the present no.5, via Bonaiuto. The main body of this small church is roofed by a very beautiful dome, having a diameter of 7 metres and a height of 12 metres, to which a 60 centimetres skylight was later added presumably to illuminate the church after the closure of the windows positioned in the apses before the church was incorporated in the first Bonajuto Aragonese palace. The corners of the central square space were originally enriched with elegant marble columns that had no load-bearing function but greatly embellished the interior. The walls were covered by frescoes of which a few fragments remain. Above*

*the West and North arches of the apses, one can admire small rectangular windows with depressed arches that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries opened into the women's gallery of the church, to enable them to follow the religious services without being seen by the men standing downstairs”<sup>12</sup>*

One item of great interest in the Byzantine church - which, according to P. Gazzola, dates back to the sixth century<sup>13</sup> and was built using recycled material from ancient Roman ruins - was the inclusion of four Ionic columns that once defined the square shape of the central space, neatly set in prepared vertical ‘compartments’ for the purpose, as shown in the reproduced illustration from a guidebook to the building entitled *Cappella Bonajuto: preziosa architettura bizantina a Catania* authored by Antonino Scifo and Gaudenzia Flaccavento and published in Catania: Alma editore in 2005<sup>14</sup> [Fig.7]. A detailed examination of the remains of these columns suggests a close stylistic affinity to similar sixth-century column capitals discovered in 1931 in the neighbouring city of Siracusa, now exhibited in the Bellomo Museum. And according to G. Randazzo,<sup>15</sup> similar Byzantine age capitals have also been found in the via Dottor Consoli necropolis in Catania. This scholar also reproduces in his work drawings of three fifteenth-century

---

12 This undated but informative leaflet, produced by the Bonaiuto family to promote the Byzantine church for touristic purposes is entitled *Cappella Bonajuto Living*, is based on research that has been carried out in the family archives. A good account of the church can also be found in Sapienza, V., *La cappella Bonajuto in Catania*, Quaderni del Dipartimento di Architettura e Urbanistica dell'Università di Catania, 18 (Catania, 1990), 111-134.

13 Gazzola, P., *I monumenti della Sicilia Orientale* in ‘Bollettino Storico Catanese’, year VI: 1941 – XIX, 7-10. See also Libertini, G., *Catania nell'eta bizantina* in ‘Archivio Storico della Sicilia Orientale’ no. 28, 1932.242-266; Rizza, G., *Un martyrium paleocristiano in Catania* in ‘Oikumene’: *Studi Paleocristiani pubblicati in onore del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II*. (Catania, 1969), 593-612; Ardito and Scifo, *Catania archeologica* (Catania, 2002); Fallico A.M and Gazzetta, G., *Recenti apporti alle testimonianze sugli abitanti nella Sicilia orientale* in ‘Bizantino-Sicula,’ IV, *Atti del Primo Congresso internazionale archeologia della Sicilia Bizantina*. (Palermo, 2002), 687-712.

14 Flaccavento and Scifo, *Cappella Bonajuto*, 22

15 Randazzo, *Il Complesso monumentale*, 739-740



century portals belonging to the first Bonajuto palace which have been integrated in the new Baroque palace in a gesture of respect for his ancestors shown by Baron Francesco Bonajuto during the rebuilding operations of the Baroque age.

In conclusion, one can say that the ‘conservation’ of the above-mentioned medieval relics in the present post-1693 earthquake Bonajuto Palace in Catania represents a rare departure from normal practice in the Baroque age where the preference was to use sites that would have been cleared of encumbrances of past buildings.<sup>16</sup> It is to the great credit of Francesco Bonajuto, the ancestor of the present Baron Salvatore Bonajuto, that this bulldozing mentality was not applied in the rebuilding operations that would have taken place in his Catania palace after the devastating earthquake of 1693. It is said - but not yet proved by archival material - that these operations would have been carried out under the overall supervision of the Baroque architect Giovanni Battista Vaccarini, who, incidentally also showed the same sensitivity towards past relics in his interventions in the partially-destroyed Medieval Cathedral of Catania.

---

16 Mumford, L., *The City in History* (Harmondsworth, 1961). 442-443. This author writes that “*Long before the invention of bulldozers, the Italian military engineer (of the Baroque age) developed, through his professional specialization in destruction, a bulldozing habit of mind – one that sought to clear the ground from encumbrances, so as to make a clear beginning on his own inflexible mathematical lines. Often, these encumbrances were human households, shops, churches, neighbourhoods, treasured memorials, the basis of a whole tissue of habits and social relations. The wholesale removal of the buildings embodying these forms of life would wipe out the cooperation and fidelities of a lifetime, often many lifetimes.*”



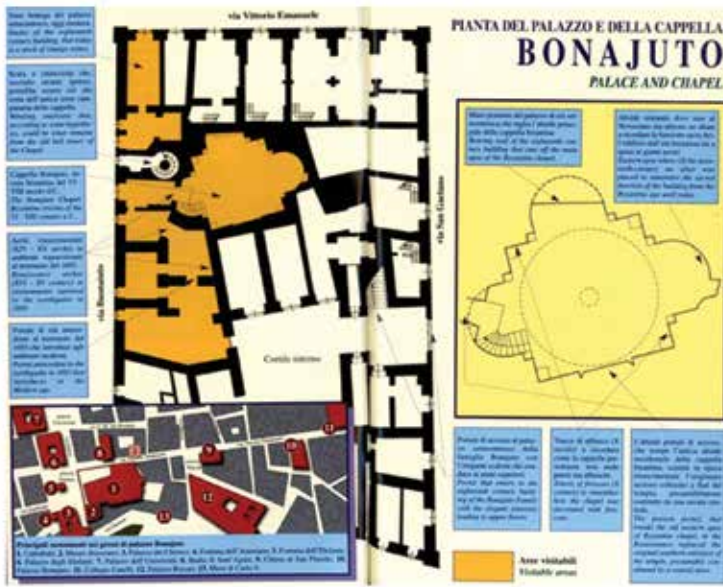
Figure 1. The 1693 earthquake document in the Casanatense Library in Rome.



**Figure 2.** Portrait of Jean-Pierre Houël ( Image source: Wikimedia.org).



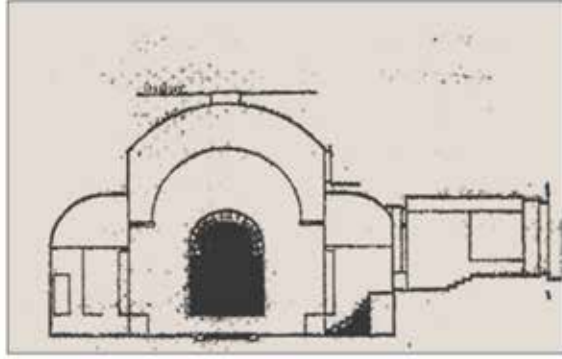
**Figure 3.** Houël, Jean-Pierre-Louis-Laurent. Byzantine church in the Bonajuto palace in Catania, Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (Inv. no.OR-3925).



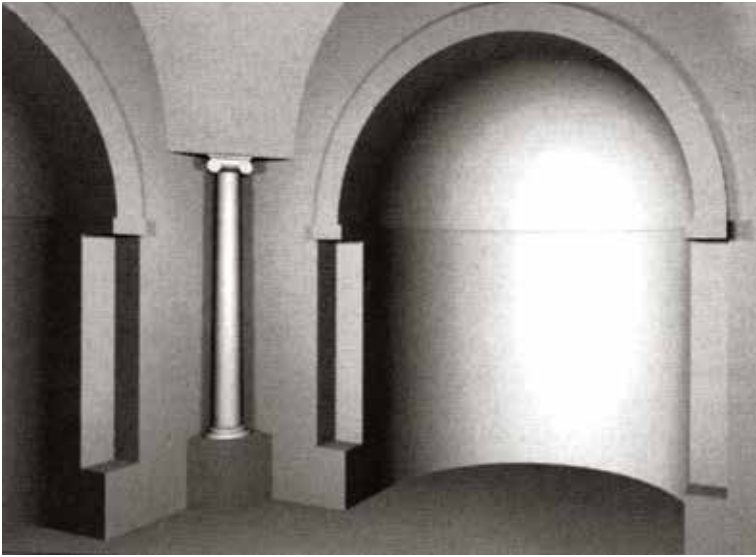
**Figure 4.** The Baroque Bonajuto Palace as reproduced in Flaccavento and Scifo - *Cappella Bonajuto Preziosa architettura bizantina.*



**Figure 5.** View of the spiral staircase.



**Figure 6.** View and longitudinal section of the Byzantine Church.



**Figure 7.** Reconstruction of the interior of the Byzantine church.





**Figure 1.** Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta).



**Figure 2.** Keys from Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with the kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.



**Figure 3.** *Cavallerizzo Maggiore* from Favray's Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam Taking Possession of Mdina, Mid-Eighteenth Century. Reproduced with the kind permission of Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta.